



WF 100 Centenary QE11CC – Mrs Dudley Buchanan's Speech

Honoured guests, Wives, good afternoon. What a very special day. Thank you Eileen, and thank you Jo and everyone who has worked wonders to make this happen. Thank you Julia and your magnificent mannequins stylishly and wittily modelling what wives have worn in each decade. As you probably know, Vogue magazine also celebrates its

centenary this year; but who needs Vogue fashion plates when we have our own live Wives show. And thank you everyone for modelling – embodying Wives now. Did anyone else have a dilemma what to wear to-day? 'To hat or not to hat, Hat is the question!' I might just add, when it comes to outfits for to-day, it's probably just as well we weren't all instructed to come as we went to our first Wives meeting; because in my case, that would have been nappies! Wimbledon branch was founded around the time I was born: it has been suggested, even as a direct result, with our mothers seeking solidarity and solace from coping with screaming and demanding post-War baby boomers like myself. If true, that would mean I can claim - though for a rather shameful reason - to be responsible for the birth of a WF branch. This timing meant that, probably like many of us, I'm lucky to have grown up in Wives, and as a married woman, then widow, remain there now.

The question to-day has to be 'How does it feel to be 100?' Judging by the decibel level and buzz, starting much earlier to-day, it feels pretty good. And, I suggest, not everyone (except Her Majesty the Queen, though she is a mere 90, if not a treasonable offence to say so) celebrates their 100th birthday by literally stopping the traffic in Parliament Square! We rightly celebrate when we or someone we know reaches 100. A century – in cricket and in life – is special. At the same time, we are realistically aware that with us individuals, increased age leads to possible increased frailty, and ultimately end of life on earth. As we gather to celebrate to-day, we are conscious of our Fellowship's 'great cloud of witnesses' - so many who have shared the journey but gone before us. Many feature in the wonderful 'Spirit of Wives' centenary book, and in individual and corporate memories shared and treasured with each other to-day. But we don't have to be gloomy: being part of an institution such as WF gives a bigger context. We feel that those who

have gone before us are still very much part of our on-going story and life, and contribute to the corporate DNA, as do all of us now and in the future. The 'Spirit of Wives' book so well illustrates the many distinct, non-uniform participants right from the beginning. All kinds of personalities, various enthusiasms and circumstances.

Some might do labelled things, even dubbed 'high achievers', but whether or not labelled, Wives values the quality of each and every member, and what each brings to the rich mix of fellowship, which doesn't seek or need worldly acclaim. Everyone's contribution matters. Wives could be said to demonstrate myriad ways of being (and I mean this in a totally non-pejorative sense) ordinary, but in individual and lively ways. We pray to be 'of one heart and one mind' concerning the Fellowship's aims: but individual wives and branches are free to achieve these aims in their own way. Wives belong to different denominations, they exercise their political and electoral responsibilities through different parties, they remain individual thinkers.

Perhaps this can be summed up in a phrase that caught my eye: 'the eagle, to fly, needs all its feathers'. Gathering together these individuals, as vividly demonstrated to-day, and articulated in our centenary celebrations and literature, there is the overarching sense of wider fellowship. The shared material of magazine and website, regional and national gatherings, bring branches and members together in a valuable way. Institutions such as WF can continue to exist, for many centuries, by incorporating the habit of revising and refreshing themselves; adapting and embracing evolving circumstances. I am sure many of us have been following the celebrations of our Queen's 90th birthday and record breaking length of reign, referred to also by the Dean in his sermon this morning. The TV programmes, features and commentators about this, all stress the Queen's achievement of perpetual refreshment of the monarchy: this ability, appropriately and effectively, to adapt and evolve. What better role model could we have than Her Majesty the Queen? As well as belonging to WF, I'm sure many of us are part, if not of the monarchy, of other longstanding institutions. The Skinners' Company to which I belong is nearly seven hundred years old. Over these seven centuries, it has managed to survive and thrive by adapting: evolving from a medieval guild controlling the fur trade with philanthropy and looking after those fallen on hard times as a side issue, into nowadays an umbrella charitable institution supporting schools and colleges, modern sheltered housing complexes and a large portfolio of grant- making charities being our core business. Admittedly, in some areas, it has evolved pretty slowly - taking 68 years before electing a Master who wasn't a man! Perhaps in another 586 years – or indeed, beating

Skinner, well before that - WF will be earnestly discussing electing a Chairman who isn't a woman ...who knows ?

The 'Spirit of Wives' book charts this quality of resilience, this ability to accept change: as some avenues might close, seeing others opening up - an openness to new ways of being, however any particular 'now' presents itself. But at the same time being honest and unpretentious. Openness to possibilities, but in a realistic way. Not beating ourselves up about what we are not, or could ever be, but humbly and honestly, to the best of our ability and resources, always looking for the best ways forward. The important thing is to keep, not defensive and inward looking, but ever open and welcoming to possibilities. I would like to highlight briefly, as we celebrate our first centenary, three particular features of WF which can encourage it not just to survive, but to thrive.

First, WF has no physical HQ. Wives, amazingly, does all that it does - and that's a lot, including these centenary celebrations - without a physical central office. Many institutions are blessed with, or might feel stuck with, a physical built environment. Such building as our illustrious neighbours here - St Margaret's where we had the privilege of worshipping this morning, and Westminster Abbey where we will join in Evening Prayer later, are obviously very beautiful buildings: enhancers of life, lifting the spirit and inspiring worship.

But I suggest there's an advantage for WF in 'positive homelessness', as well as the obvious one of release from the burden of building maintenance (which I guess we all now about from our own homes and certainly local church buildings). I think we can dare to claim, Wives is a true representation of 'church' / 'ecclesia' in the New Testament sense: people rather than the place where they worship. Wives has embodiment not in bricks and mortar but in people interacting. Freedom to move, rather than set in stone. And further, not having a fixed HQ or central postcode means all members are on an equal footing: you can't be 'nearer the centre' or 'peripheral'. Wherever you live, whichever your branch, we are all equal, including that wonderfully named branch stretching around the world - Scattereds. I'm glad many Scattereds are Gathered here amongst us to-day. We certainly include them in our thoughts and centenary celebrations wherever they are. And of course, that goes for those nearer home, unable to be with us now, and those gathering at the various satellite events in parallel to this one. So, the freedom of no fixed abode.

A second key point is that this is a fellowship. Fellowship implies something more than just membership. Membership, of a club or whatever, involves qualifying to join, probably by paying a fee of some kind, which buys you entitlement to get certain benefits and privileges. A fellowship is something as much about giving as getting. Everyone contributes to the corporate life, it is mutually supportive. Fellowship is a special quality, depending on individuals combining together to make something greater. And it is dynamic, mutually giving and receiving all the time; whether at the practical level, such as each taking turns to serve on committees and do tasks; or wider mutual encouragement and support, sharing joys and sorrows, praying for one another, at any one time ready to balance any sinking feelings of spirit for some with current buoyancy of others. Over time, that acquires depth, and builds a particular kind of mutual confidence. So, freedom, fellowship and thirdly .Deeper than the surface is a further special element: the spirit of Wives. We can certainly sense a lot of 'spirit' manifesting itself to-day, it's very evident! The underlying spirit of Wives is, of course, because of where we get it from. In our various home base worshipping communities, we share that underlying well spring. In my livery company life, above the Hall entrance is the reminder 'To God only be all glory', and Skinners' Latin motto 'in Christo fratres' - brothers (including sisters) in Christ. That's very like our Wives motto: 'Our fellowship is with Christ and with one another'. Our service this morning, like all Wives services, was no mere 'nod to God' before getting on with the business of socialising. It is a manifestation of the underlying principle of why we are gathered, and why our Fellowship exists.

The Spirit of Wives is animated and can be visible to-day and always, because it is fed by something far beyond our individual selves or even our shared fellowship. And we thank God for that. We thank God that WF is a live and lively phenomenon. So it's high time I stop and we get on with doing and being Wives Fellowship ... thank you